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COMP4905 – HONOURS PROJECT

Formation Flight of UAVs Swarms in an Obstacle-Filled Three-Dimensional Environment

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Abstract

Abstract goes here!

Acknowledgements

This project uses Webots (<http://www.cyberbotics.com>), an open-source mobile robot simulation software developed by Cyberbotics Ltd.

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1 Introduction

Cooperation among different individuals in a group is often necessary to solve complex problems that are otherwise harder or impossible to complete for a singular individual. This concept is true in the field of robotics where robotic swarms have become an increasingly popular area of study. Robotic swarms are usually composed of many small and limited individual robots (Oh et al. 2017) collaborating to achieve a shared goal. Due to the early stage of development of this field, there are not many currently existing applications, however there exists many research projects to test the capabilities of swarm algorithms (Schranz et al. 2020). Despite the lack of representation in the industry sector, multi-robot systems have become of interest recently due to their abilities to resist failures and damages, adaptability to new environments and low costs (Oh et al. 2017).

A specific problem in swarm robotics is the pattern formation problem, which consists of "getting a group of robots to form and stay in a specific formation, like a wedge or a chain, and maintaining that formation" (Sri and Suvarchala 2022). The robots in the swarm need to coordinate to maintain a specific shape in order to achieve the desired goal. In this process, different methods of controlling the swarm can be used, for example the election of a leader or the imposition of a certain set of behaviors for each member. There is also a distinction between centralized and decentralized pattern formation, where centralized pattern formation is performed when there exists a centralized unit that coordinates the individual robots (Oh et al. 2017).

1.1 Swarms of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

A swarm of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles is a swarm of robots where each robot is capable of flight using a set of rotors. These swarms have multiple uses. They are commonly used in military applications, but they are also used for civilian applications, such as aerial surveys, disaster management, environment mapping, search and rescue, and for leisure (Tahir et al. 2019). These are applications that would benefit from pattern formation, as we can direct the swarm to take an optimal shape for its use case. For example, we can choose a shape to best cover an area while performing an aerial survey or environment mapping, or adopt a chain-like formation to establish communication

between two points (Schranz et al. 2020) which can be deployed at a site of a natural disaster to aid in search and rescue efforts.

1.2 Objectives

The objective of this project is to provide a distributed solution to the pattern formation problem, meaning build a system of multiple robots capable of positioning themselves in a specific shape and maintain this shape while navigating an environment populated by obstacles. This will be achieved using obstacle detection and avoidance techniques, as well as distributed system principles, such as leader election, and computer network principles. For this project we chose to use unmanned aerial vehicles to demonstrate the efficacy of the solution. Similar work being done includes (Chen et al. 2021), where a hierarchical approach is applied to formation control of fixed wing UAVs, by breaking up the swarm into several smaller groups each headed by a leader.

2 Methodology

In this chapter we will explore the method used in and considered for this project. Since this project contains multiple sub-problems we decided to divide this chapter into four sections.

2.1 Automated flight

The first consideration for this project is about the autonomous flight of the UAVs, meaning that there should not be any input from the user regarding the flight control. This problem can then be broken down into two components: the control algorithm that controls the ability of the UAV to fly and the navigation algorithm that controls the direction of flight.

2.1.1 Control Algorithm

Flight controllers can be subdivided into two categories: linear controllers and non-linear controllers. Linear controllers use linear methods to control flight, which includes conventional controllers such as PID, H_∞ controller, gain scheduling and Linear Quadratic Regulator. On the other hand, non-linear controller are derived from the original dynamic model of the UAVs and arose to overcome shortcomings of linear controllers. They are generally harder to implement than linear controllers. Some examples are Feedback linearization, backstepping, sliding mode control, adaptive control, and model predictive control. (Nguyen et al. 2020)

For this project we settled on linear controller due to their simplicity to implement, in particular we considered the PID controller and the LQR controller.

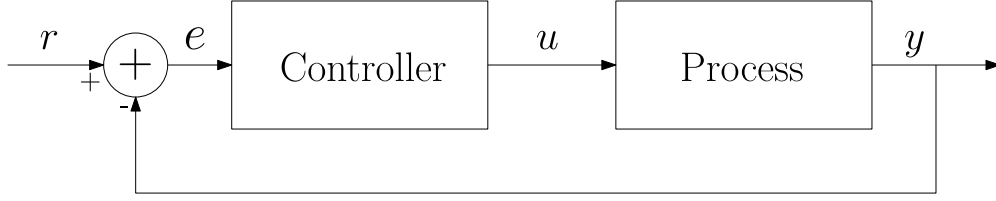


FIGURE 2.1: Diagram of a conventional PID controller

PID Control

The Proportional Integral Derivative controller is the most common controller used in industrial settings due to its usefulness and ease of implementation. (Lopez-Sanchez and Moreno-Valenzuela 2023) The controller is composed by a proportional element, an integral element and a derivative element, that represent the present, past and future error value (Araki 2009). It is usually designed in the structure represented in Fig. 2.1.

The controller first computes the error at a specific time t ($e(t)$) using Eq. (2.1).

$$e(t) = r(t) - y(t) \quad (2.1)$$

Where $r(t)$ is the set value and $y(t)$ is the real value of the process (Araki 2009). From the computed error the controller then finds a control factor $u(t)$ using a proportional coefficient (K_p), an integral coefficient (K_I) and a derivative coefficient (K_D) using Eq. (2.2) (Nguyen et al. 2020).

$$u(t) = K_p e(t) + K_I \int_0^t e(t) dt + K_D \frac{de(t)}{dt} \quad (2.2)$$

In this project we decided to implement a PID controller due to the ease of implementation and the higher number of resources available at our disposal.

LQR Control

The other option considered, is the Linear-Quadratic Regulator controller (LQR controller), which is the optimal linear controller to operate a dynamic system at minimum cost (Nguyen et al. 2020).

$$J_{LQR} = \int_0^{\infty} y_i^T(t) Q y_i(t) + u_i^T(t) R u_i(t) dt \quad (2.3)$$

Eq. (2.3) computes the minimum quadratic cost (J_{LQR}) from the control input u_i and control output y_i , using two weight matrices (Q and R) (Nguyen et al. 2020).

2.1.2 Navigation Algorithm

For the navigation algorithm we used a simple algorithm where given a waypoint, we compute the derivative component of the PID algorithm. This can be achieved with the following algorithm.

Algorithm 1 Simple algorithm for UAV navigation using PID adapted from (Cyberbotics 2023) source code

Input: u, v, Y

Output: Y_d, P_d

```

1:  $\alpha \leftarrow ((\text{atan2}(u_y - v_y, u_x - v_x) - Y) + 2\pi) \bmod(2\pi)$ 
2: if  $\alpha > \pi$  then
3:    $\alpha \leftarrow \alpha - 2\pi$ 
4: end if
5:  $Y_d \leftarrow K_{Yd_{max}} \frac{\alpha}{2\pi}$ 
6:  $P_d \leftarrow \log(|\alpha|)$ 
7: if  $P_d < K_{Pd_{max}}$  then
8:    $P_d \leftarrow K_{Pd_{max}}$ 
9: else if  $P_d > 0.1$  then
10:   $P_d \leftarrow 0.1$ 
11: end if
12: return  $Y_d, P_d$ 

```

Where u and v are vectors representing the UAV position and the waypoint position, Y is the current yaw angle of the UAV, Y_d and P_d are the yaw angle disturbance and the pitch angle disturbance respectively, and $K_{Yd_{max}}$ and $K_{Pd_{max}}$ are the maximum allowed disturbance of the yaw and pitch respectively.

Once the values of Y_d and P_d are computed they are then passed into the PID Controller which computes the amount of power to the engines necessary to move the UAV on the desired trajectory.

2.2 Obstacle Detection

There exist a wide array of sensors used in obstacle detections, some of these include passive sensors like cameras and infrared sensors, and active sensors like lidar, radar and ladar. Passive sensors absorb energy, like light or infrared waves, to create a picture of the environment while active sensors emit their own energy then collect the reflection emitted by the environment. Active sensors are better suited for our application, as they do not depend on atmospheric conditions or lighting condition to operate. However, active sensors are prone to interference from other sources of electromagnetic waves. (Discant et al. 2007) For this project we decided to equip the UAVs with radar to detect obstacles.

Webots offers a simulation of a radar sensor which detects targets in the environment and provides their distance from the sensor, the power received back from the target, the speed relative to the sensor, and the horizontal angle (the azimuth) between the target and the sensor (Webots 2024). However, simply knowing this information about the obstacle is not sufficient as we need to find its position in order to avoid it.

2.2.1 Target Coordinates Extraction

To compute the position of a target we simply need its distance from the sensor, d , and the azimuth, α from the values returned from Webots API. Assuming that the UAV position is located at the origin, the distance between the UAV and the target can be considered a vector with magnitude d and the azimuth is the angle between the distance vector and the direction vector of the UAV. We call these vectors v and u respectively.

Thus, what we are trying to find is $v = \begin{bmatrix} v_x \\ v_y \end{bmatrix}$.

Given that we have two vectors and the angle between them, we can then find their dot product, where $\|v\| = d$, using Eq. (2.4).

$$u \cdot v = \|u\| \|v\| \cos \alpha = u_x v_x + u_y v_y \quad (2.4)$$

We assume u is a unit vector. Since u is the direction of the UAV then the angle β is the angle between the vector u and the x-axis, and can be calculated from the heading of the UAV. Thus, we can compute the components of u using Eq. (2.5) and Eq. (2.6).

$$u_x = \cos \beta \quad (2.5)$$

$$u_y = \sin \beta \quad (2.6)$$

Therefore, we can rewrite Eq. (2.4) combined with the values of u_x and u_y resulting in Eq. (2.7).

$$\|v\| \cos \alpha = v_x \cos \beta + v_y \sin \beta \quad (2.7)$$

Similarly to u , we can also find the components of v using the angle between v and the x-axis, γ which is equal to $\beta - \alpha$. Using this angle we can write an equation to find the components of v .

$$\tan \gamma = \frac{v_y}{v_x} \quad (2.8)$$

Eq. (2.8) can then be written in terms of v_y resulting in Eq. (2.9).

$$v_y = v_x \tan \gamma \quad (2.9)$$

Finally, we can combine Eq. (2.7) with Eq. (2.9) to create one equation to find the x component of v .

$$v_x = \frac{d \cos \alpha}{\cos \beta + \tan \gamma \sin \beta} \quad (2.10)$$

Solving Eq. (2.10) and Eq. (2.9) will produce the coordinates of the target relative to the UAV. From there it is simply necessary to translate the vector v by the UAV position, resulting in the absolute position of the obstacle.

2.3 Obstacle Avoidance

Once obstacles are detected, the UAVs should be capable of avoiding them and navigate between them until a goal is reached. As explained above, the navigation algorithm used in this project computes the trajectory to take to reach a specific waypoint, so we can define the path the UAVs have to take as a list of waypoints. If we restrict the waypoints as being intersections of cells in a grid then we can abstract this grid as being a graph. Thus, what we wish to do, in this case, is to find a path from a starting node to a predefined end node, or search the graph for a specific node.

There exist many algorithms capable of solving this problem, with the most popular being A*. In the following subsections we will explore different algorithms considered for this project.

2.3.1 A*

The most obvious and popular solution is the A* algorithm, which improves on Dijkstra's algorithm by using heuristics to decide which node should be considered next (*A* Search Algorithm* n.d.). However, since we are working in an unknown environment where the UAVs gain more knowledge of the obstacles locations as they progress, the path needs to be re-planned each time a new obstacle is found. This can become computationally expensive as we need to execute A* multiple times.

2.3.2 Path Planning in Partially-Known Environments with D*

In conditions where the UAVs do not have complete information about their surroundings it is advantageous to use an algorithm that assumes the possibility of potential changes in costs of the nodes. One of such algorithms is D*.

D* is capable of generating optimal paths for sensor equipped robots with a map of the environment that can be complete, partial or empty. The algorithm formulates the path planning process as a set of states, that represent potential robot locations, connected by directional arcs each with an associated cost. The algorithm maintains a list of states which cost has changed over time, and each time a cost is changed the affected states are added onto the list. Instead of re-planning the whole path, D* adjusts the path from the states where a change in cost happened and subsequent states. Thus, it operates faster in real-life scenarios than an algorithm that re-plans the whole trajectory each time a new obstacle is found. (Stenz 1994)

Despite its advantage over other algorithms, it is still possible to improve over D*. For example, D* Lite claims to be as efficient if not better than D* but with a simpler implementation (Koenig and Likhachev 2005).

2.3.3 Field D*: Improving D* Lite Using Interpolation

For this project we decided to implement Field D*, due to its promises of minimizing unnecessary turns and generating less expensive paths than D* and D* Lite. Field D* achieves this by using interpolation in the computation of the cost of the path. (Ferguson and Stentz 2006)

Most path planning algorithms that use a grid as underlying graph compute the cost of a node s , $g(s)$, using Eq. (2.11).

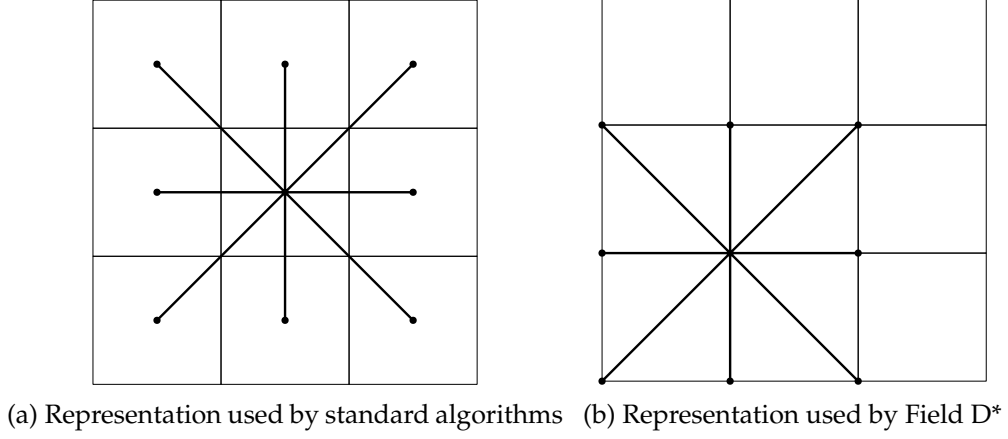


FIGURE 2.2: Representation of nodes positioning in standard path planning algorithms and field D*

$$g(s) = \min_{s' \in nbrs(s)} [c(s, s') + g(s')] \quad (2.11)$$

Where $nbrs(s)$ is the set of neighbors of node s , $c(s, s')$ is the cost of traversing the edge between s and s' , and $g(s')$ is the path cost of s' . This assumes that the only possible path is a straight line between the nodes, resulting in limitations as described by (Ferguson and Stentz 2006). In order to overcome these limitations, Field D* finds an approximation of the cost of the path to any cell boundary node s_b using linear interpolation. To do this, the algorithm assumes that the nodes of the graph are not located at the center of the cells as shown in Fig. 2.2a but rather at the vertices as shown in Fig. 2.2b (Ferguson and Stentz 2006). It then follows Algorithm 2 to compute the path cost, v_s , of a node s given two of its neighbors s_a and s_b .

Field D* is not a faster algorithm than D* Lite, with a planning time 1.7 times slower than its non-interpolation-based counterpart, but it offers a more economical path, 96% as costly as D* Lite on average (Ferguson and Stentz 2006). Its path generation efficiency makes this algorithm competitive in some settings where minimizing the path cost is the main goal, for example in situation where the cost factor is the amount of fuel required to traverse an area.

Algorithm 2 Field D* path cost computation procedure by (Ferguson and Stentz 2006)

Input: s, s_a, s_b **Output:** v_s

```
1: if  $s_a$  is diagonal neighbor of  $s$  then
2:    $s_1 \leftarrow s_b$ 
3:    $s_2 \leftarrow s_a$ 
4: else
5:    $s_1 \leftarrow s_a$ 
6:    $s_2 \leftarrow s_b$ 
7: end if
8:  $c$  is traversal cost of cell with corners  $s, s_1, s_2$ 
9:  $b$  is traversal cost of cell with corners  $s, s_1$  but not  $s_2$ .
10: if  $\min(c, b) = \infty$  then
11:    $v_s \leftarrow \infty$ 
12: else if  $g(s_1) \leq g(s_2)$  then
13:    $v_s \leftarrow \min(c, b) + g(s_1)$ 
14: else
15:    $f \leftarrow g(s_1) - g(s_2)$ 
16:   if  $f \leq b$  then
17:     if  $c \leq f$  then
18:        $v_s \leftarrow c\sqrt{2} + g(s_2)$ 
19:     else
20:        $y \leftarrow \min\left(\frac{f}{\sqrt{c^2 - f^2}}, 1\right)$ 
21:        $v_s \leftarrow c\sqrt{1 + y^2} + f(1 - y) + g(s_2)$ 
22:     end if
23:   else
24:     if  $c \leq b$  then
25:        $v_s \leftarrow c\sqrt{2} + g(s_2)$ 
26:     else
27:        $x \leftarrow 1 - \min\left(\frac{b}{\sqrt{c^2 - b^2}}, 1\right)$ 
28:        $v_s \leftarrow c\sqrt{1 + (1 - x)^2} + bx + g(s_2)$ 
29:     end if
30:   end if
31: end if
32: return  $v_s$ 
```

2.4 Pattern Formation

The central aspect of this project is pattern formation, which we already discussed in the previous chapter. In this section we will discuss the technical detail behind our solution to the pattern formation project.

2.4.1 Leader-follower structure

In this project, we organized the UAVs in a structure composed of one leader and multiple followers. The goal of the leader is to plan a path to reach the goal and communicate each way points to the followers, while the followers simply fly towards the waypoints assigned by the leader. Each waypoint is computed in order to preserve a specific shape dictated by the initial position of the UAVs.

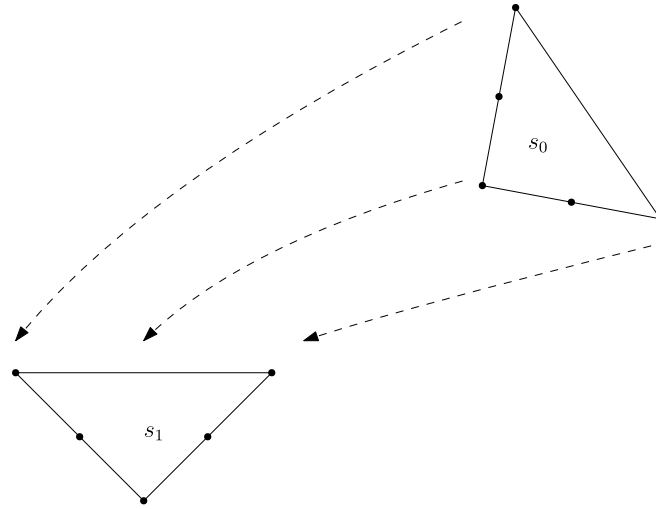


FIGURE 2.3: Graphic of desired pattern transposition from one waypoint to another

To achieve this each waypoint for each follower is computed not only from the distance from the leader but also depending on the expected heading the leader will have. The result is expected to look similar to Fig. 2.3 where the structure of the formation is not changed when a turn occurs.

Let θ be the angle between the leader UAV direction and the x-axis, we can use this angle as rotation angle for the formation. We cannot find the precise heading of the leader UAV due to possible variance in the real path the UAVs will take, but we can approximate this value given two waypoints. Let v and w be the current and next waypoints for the leader UAV. If we compute the difference of these two waypoints we

Table 2.1: Approximations of θ based on difference of $w - v$

Δx	Δy	Approx. θ
+	0	0
0	+	$\frac{1}{2}\pi$
-	0	π
0	-	$\frac{3}{2}\pi$
+	+	$\frac{1}{4}\pi$
-	+	$\frac{3}{4}\pi$
-	-	$\frac{5}{4}\pi$
+	-	$-\frac{1}{4}\pi$

can find what direction the UAV is facing when reaching this waypoint. We show these approximations in Tab. 2.1, where + is a positive difference or $w_x > v_x$, - is a negative difference or $w_x < v_x$ and 0 is no difference or $w_x = v_x$ ¹.

Once we found the value of θ we transform the orientation of the formation using a rotation matrix as shown in Eq. (2.12).

$$R = \begin{bmatrix} \cos \theta & -\sin \theta \\ \sin \theta & \cos \theta \end{bmatrix} \quad (2.12)$$

Once the formation is rotated it is then translated with respect of the leader waypoint.

¹Note: in this example we use the x components of v and w , but the principle is the same for the y components.

3 Program Structure and Inter-UAV communication

In this chapter we will explore in more detail the program we designed to illustrate our solution to the pattern formation problem.

3.1 Program Structure

The program is composed by three phases: an initialization, where all variables and parameters are initialized, a main loop, where all movements and inter-UAV communication happens, and a final clean-up phase. Each UAV's phase is independent of other UAVs and dictated by a state variable that can assume one of the values presented in Table 3.1. The state also serves to determine whether a UAV has been elected leader or not during the execution of the program.

A full overview of the program structure is available in Fig. 3.1.

Table 3.1: Possible values of the state

State value	Description
INIT	The UAV is in the initialization phase
RUN	The UAV is in the main loop phase and has been elected leader
END	The goal was reached, and the UAV is in the clean-up phase
F_RUN	The UAV is in the main loop and has not been elected leader
F_WAIT	The UAV is waiting on instructions from the leader, and it is not the leader

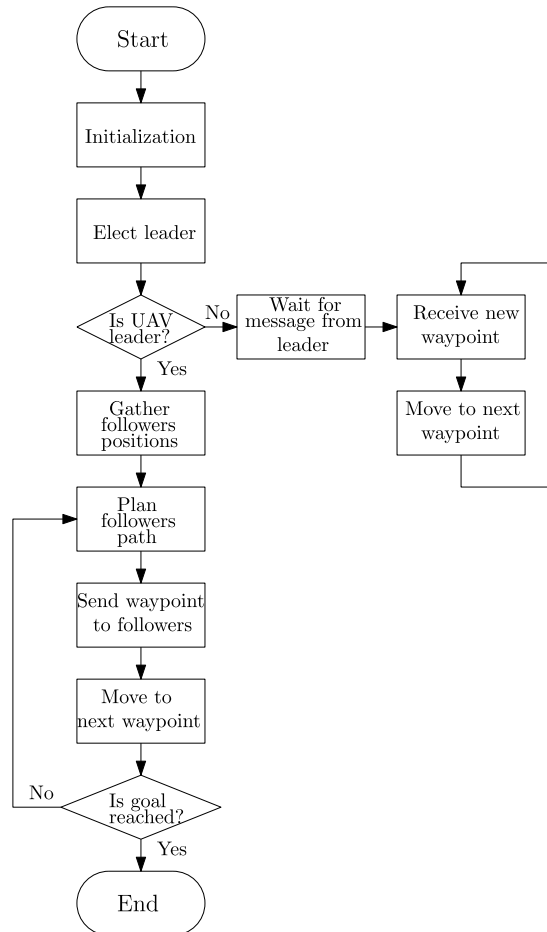


FIGURE 3.1: The flowchart diagram of the program

3.2 Inter-UAV communication

In order for the UAVs to cooperate together we equipped each UAV with a transmitter and a receiver to send messages to each other. The content of these messages varies depending on the phase of the program but are generally used to send either the UAV identifier, used for leader election and for message routing, their initial position, used by the leader to determine the shape of the formation, and the waypoint the followers need to fly to next. Each message is a packet composed of two parts: a header and message. The header contains metadata necessary to route the message to the correct UAV and the type of message, while the message part contains the content of the message which is usually a set of coordinates. A diagram of the packet is shown in Fig. 3.2.

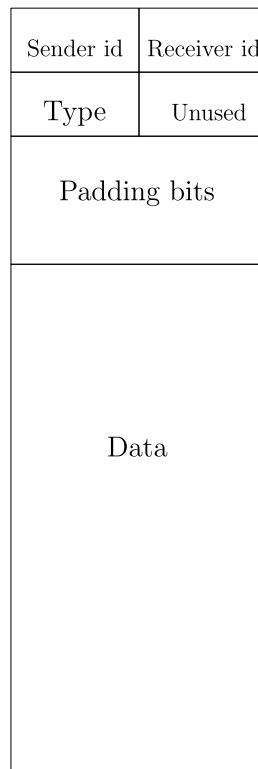


FIGURE 3.2: Diagram of a message. The diagram is 16 bits in width.

The header is 4 bytes in size, each field in the header occupy a space of 1 byte, including an unused byte. The data part of the message has a maximum size of 16 bytes, however it is only used in messages carrying information about the position of the UAV and waypoints. There are additional four bytes of padding between the header and the data.

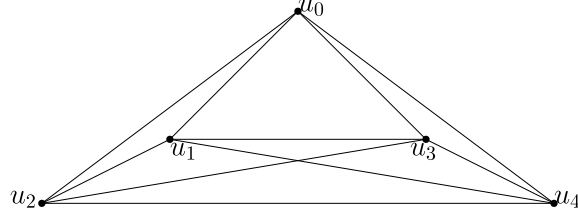


FIGURE 3.3: Network topology diagram

To keep the network simple and decrease the number of failures, all UAVs are connected to each other in a complete network as shown in Fig. 3.3.

3.2.1 Leader Election

To implement the pattern formation we need one of the UAVs to become a leader and plan the path. To achieve this we decided to implement the FloodMax algorithm for leader election. This is a simple algorithm that allows leader election in any network as long as the diameter of the network, D , is known, achieving this in a number of rounds equal to the diameter of the network (Kranakis 2023). This is particularly effective in our case as the diameter of a complete network is 1. See Algorithm 3 for the steps of FloodMax.

Algorithm 3 FloodMax Algorithm

Input: D

- 1: Each node maintains a record of the highest ID it has seen so far
 - 2: At each round the node propagates this maximum to all neighboring nodes
 - 3: After D rounds if the maximum recorded is equal to the node ID the node elects itself as leader
-

4 Results

In this section we will showcase the result obtained by applying the concept discussed above as well as some test scenarios we designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of the solution presented.

4.1 Test scenario

For this project we constructed three scenarios consisting of different environments and UAVs formations. Each scenario is constructed around one of the following use cases for UAVs swarms: disaster management, environment mapping, search and rescue and industry.

Factory scenario: Four UAVs are placed in a square formation, and they are tasked to carry a box through a busy environment like a factory with many obstacles and little room to move in.

Bird flock scenario: Five UAVs are placed in a V shape similar to a flock of birds and navigate through an obstacle filled environment.

Line scenario: Five UAVs are placed in a horizontal line, simulating a communication line between two points, and navigate in an environment.

4.2 Observations from scenarios

In this section we will discuss observations obtained from the test scenarios above. Overall the solution developed performed as expected in each scenario. The main objectives of the project were met without any faults. Among the three scenarios, the factory scenario is perhaps the most significant in terms of real world usage. In this scenario the UAVs were successfully able to navigate through the environment without touching any obstacles while maintaining the formation as closely as possible. Similarly, the other scenarios exhibit similar results.

Another notable observation is an issue that occurs when the UAVs change direction. This issue causes the formation to "stretch" and each follower UAV disperse in a different direction which is not desired behavior. We believe that this issue is caused by the followers reaching the waypoint provided by the leader before the leader reaches its own. Since the follower has no new waypoint provided it will then wonder off until a new waypoint is communicated by the leader. This is less than ideal and more work is needed to resolve this issue.

5 Conclusion

In this report we showcased our solution to the pattern formation problem in robotics for a swarm of unmanned aerial vehicles. We covered different algorithms used to control the inputs to the motors of the UAVs and different path planning algorithms, and explained what the advantages and characteristics of PID control and Field D*. We presented our approach to the pattern formation problem and provided a solution alongside test scenarios to observe its capabilities.

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